

***Kebrā Nagast* and *Al-Najāshī*: The Meaning and Use of Collective Memory in Christian-Muslim Political Discourse in Ethiopia**

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One of the earliest recorded Christian-Muslim encounters took place in Ethiopia, when the prophet Muhammad sent some of his followers to seek asylum in the land. However, in its development, Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have often experienced tensions due to conflicting political interests, inter-ethnic relations and religious aspirations. In this paper, I analyze the use of Ethiopian Christianity's Kebrā Nagast and Islam's Al-Najāshī narratives in Christian-Muslim political discourse in Ethiopia during the rule of Yohannes IV, Menilek II, Leg Iyasu and Haile Selassie. By using Maurice Halbwachs's collective memory theory I hope to cast an image of harmonious Christian-Muslim relation in the future Ethiopia.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim relations, interreligious, interfaith, collective memory, Ethiopia, peace

Introduction

Ethiopia has a unique and vital role in the history of Christian-Muslim encounters. In this country, one of the oldest, harmonious encounters between adherents of these two world religions has taken place back in Islam's earliest history. In the religious memory of Muslims all over the world, Ethiopia stands as the haven that saved the lives of some first followers of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. However, it is unfortunate that the Christian-Muslim relations in the following times in this country have not always been harmonious. Like in many parts of the world, Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have experienced ebb and flow, which are sometimes marked by violent conflict. As I will show below, these conflicts are not entirely based on Islam's and Christianity's theological differences. Most conflicts are based on complex interaction between religious claims (beliefs and memories/histories), political interests, and social dynamics, such as inter-ethnic relations.

In this paper, I highlight the use of religious collective memory in Christian-Muslim political discourse in Ethiopia. At the core, my essay is based on the work of Haggai Erlich, who convincingly points out the use of Islam's *Al-Najāshī* story in Ethiopian socio-political rhetoric.¹ I expand Erlich's findings by incorporating the Solomonic line's claim in the *Kebrā Nagast* as the collective memory used by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Hence, there are two different religious collective memories interplaying in the political discourse. I use Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory to unpack the meaning and use of *Al-Najāshī* and *Kebrā Nagast* in the Christian-Muslim political discourse in Ethiopia.² In the end, I use my analysis to cast an image of a harmonious interreligious relation in the future of Ethiopia.

¹ Haggai Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010).

² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York, NY: Harper Colophon, n.d.).

Current Status of Christian and Muslim in Ethiopia

In 2015, Pew Research reported the projection of the growth of the world's religious population 2010–2050. In the report, the Christian population in Ethiopia in 2010 was 62.8%, it slightly decreases to 61.9% in 2020, and goes down to 58.3% in 2050. On the other hand, Islam is projected to have a steady increase from 34.6% in 2010 to 35.9% and 39.9% in 2020 and 2050, respectively. This demographic change is mainly due to differences in fertility rates between Christians and Muslims. In 2010–2015 the fertility rate among Ethiopian Christians was 3.5 while it was 4.5 among Muslims. The fertility rates, however, generally will decrease in the future years. Ethiopian Christians and Muslims are predicted to have fertility rates of 1.8 and 2.2, respectively, in 2040–2045. Then the number will steadily fall in 2050–2055 to 1.6 for Christians and two for Muslims.³ Thus, it is projected that Muslims will eventually outnumber Christians in Ethiopia. The demographic data presented above are not merely numbers. They depict the possible future of Ethiopia as a country. Changes in the religious demography will drive their adherents to navigate and negotiate their terms of relation, particularly in public spaces such as the political and economic sphere.

In 2019, the US Department of State reported two interreligious incidents between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia. On February 3, 2019, some Ethiopian Orthodox youths burned mosques and vandalized business places belonging to Muslims in Amhara, a predominantly Orthodox Christian region. The other incident happened on July 18, 2019, in the Sidama Zone, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) Region. Attackers murdered a priest and two Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. They also burned down three churches and damaged four others. This incident of violence occurred in connection with the local community's demands for regional statehood.⁴ These two incidents show how the dynamic of religious demography and political aspiration may result in interreligious conflict and violence in Ethiopia.

Christian-Muslim relations are crucial in Ethiopia. Even the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, who has been serving since April 2018, intentionally mentions in his personal website *Medemer* that he was raised by a Muslim father and a Christian mother, thus “the values of tolerance and understanding across divides were instilled in him at an early age.”⁵ This statement shows how religious rhetoric and representation have an essential and inseparable role in Ethiopian social and political life. The close relationship between religious and social categories can also be seen in proverbs commonly used in Ethiopian society. Terje Østebø shows that in the Oromo and Amharic languages, respectively spoken by predominantly Muslim Oromo and Christian Amhara, there is a proverb that says, “I and you are like a Muslim and an Amhara.”⁶ Interestingly, this proverb does not use the term *Christian* as opposed to *Muslim* or

³ Pew-Templeton Global Religious Future Project, “Ethiopia”

http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/ethiopia/religious_demography#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010

⁴ Office of International Religious Freedom 2019, “Report on International Religious Freedom: Ethiopia”

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/ethiopia/>

⁵ H.E. Abiy Ahmed Ali, “About” <https://medemer.et/about/> (accessed Nov. 10, 2020)

⁶ The proverb in Oromo, “*Anafi si, akka Islaama fi Amhara*” is equivalent with the Amharic proverb, “*Ene’na ante lik’ende Islem’na Amhara nen.*” Terje Østebø, “The Role and Relevance of Religion in Ethiopia’s Current Conflicts” Addis

Oromo as opposed to *Amhara*. However, the proverb closely juxtaposes religious identity to ethnic identity and depicts the other as entirely other. Hence, to be an Oromo is to be a Muslim, and to be an Amhara is to be Christian, given the fact that the Amhara ethnic group is historically the principal adherent of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.⁷ These two cases reflect the tension between maintaining religious identity against each other or conflating them to uphold the national identity.

The above-mentioned cases also indicate the importance of religious identity in the Ethiopians’ sociopolitical and religious imagination or expectation. In his book *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, Haggai Erlich shows how religious memory and rhetoric have been used throughout Ethiopia’s political history. Toward the end of his book, Erlich quotes Najib Mohammed:

In Islamic history and tradition, Ethiopia (Abyssinia or Al-Habasha) is known as the “Haven of the First Migration or Hijra.” For Muslims, Ethiopia is synonymous with freedom from persecution and emancipation from fear. Ethiopia was a land where its king, Negus or Al-Najāshī, was a person renowned for justice and in whose land human rights were cherished. . . . The first migration [Hijra] of the Companions and relatives of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) to Ethiopia celebrates the birth of freedom of expression and beliefs, whereas, the Second Migration of the Prophet Muhammad to the Madinah celebrates the end of oppression.⁸

Thus, Mohammed represents the Ethiopian Muslims’ expectation of their homeland, and it is based on and informed by Islamic religious memory. For every Muslim, Ethiopia will always be remembered as the land of *Al-Najāshī*, who warmly welcomed the first Muslim refugees from Medina. As I will show later, this story is written in Ibn Ishaq’s *Sirat Rasul Allah*, the earliest biography (or hagiography) of the Prophet Muhammad and his mission. Thus, the story is firmly embedded in the Islamic tradition. For Najib Mohammed and other Ethiopian Muslims, however, that story also fuels their political expectations. From Mohammed’s words above, one can sense that Ethiopian Muslims aspire to an Ethiopia that gives them safety, justice, freedom of persecution and fear, and freedom of expression and beliefs.

On the other hand, the image of Ethiopia above has no grip upon Ethiopian Christians. Although the story lives in the memory of every Muslim, Christians have no memory of nor reference to it.⁹ In the memory of Ethiopian Christians, Ethiopia is and always has been a Christian country. Back in the day when Islam spread and grew steadily in the horn of Africa, Ethiopian Christians formed their self-image as “a Christian island in the sea of Muslims” and

Standard Nov. 6, 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/special-edition-the-role-and-relevance-of-religion-in-ethiopia-current-conflicts/> (accessed Nov. 15, 2020).

⁷ “Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Jan. 3, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ethiopian-Orthodox-Tewahedo-Church> (accessed November 9, 2020).

⁸ Najib Mohammed, “The Haven of the First Hijra (Migration): An African Nation Is the Muslims’ First Refuge,” <http://www.soundvision.com/Info/history/bkhabasha.asp> cited in Haggai Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 177. Najib Mohammed is the founder and president of the First Hijrah Foundation (an Ethiopian Muslims Organization) in Washington, D.C. See <https://www.ethiopiustrustfund.org/team/najib-mohammed/>

⁹ Through their interaction with Muslims, Christians may hear and know about the story, but it is not part of their collective memory with which they identify themselves.

portrayed the neighboring Muslim countries as “historically fixed potential or actual enemies.”¹⁰ Muslims who lived inside the border were seen as second-class citizens, aliens, or foreigners.¹¹ Formally, Ethiopia’s ideology as a Christian island has been put to an end since the reign of Meles Zenawi as president in 1991. Zenawi opened Ethiopia to Islam by making Muslims “equal partners” to Christians.¹² However, this Christian Island ideology is still living as a collective memory among Christians, especially in the mind of Ethiopia’s leadership and upper class.¹³

Halbwachs’s Collective Memory Theory

The study of collective memory is vast and varied; it has been studied from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, to name a few. In this paper, I limit myself to use Maurice Halbwachs’s explanation since he was the first person to introduce and use the term. Unfortunately, of the two books he wrote on collective memory, Halbwachs gave only descriptions and not definitions of the terms he introduced.¹⁴ Halbwachs, according to Lewis Coser, “was . . . the first sociologist who stressed that our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems.” Thus, Coser concludes that, for Halbwachs, collective memory is “essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present.”¹⁵ Here Coser mirrors Barry Schwartz’s thought, “the collective memory comes into view as both a cumulative and an episodic construction of the past.”¹⁶ Both definitions define collective memory as an attempt to construct or reconstruct the past to interpret and be interpreted by the present.

In *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs mentions four interrelated types of memory. The first two are individual and collective memory. The two are different entities. Yet for Halbwachs, they are so interconnected that he seems to conflate the former with the latter. Halbwachs states, “Our memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned.”¹⁷ Here lies the fundamental claim of the role and meaning of collective memory. For a person, her memory is always formed, informed, and shaped by the existence and influence of other’s memory. One’s memory of having a personal tour in London, for example, is shaped by the books and maps that one read about the city and by stories of family members and friends who previously shared their experience and memory about London. Individual memory will never be entirely individual; it is

¹⁰ Hussien, Seifuddin Adem, “Islam, Christianity and Ethiopia’s Foreign Policy.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1997): 129. doi:10.1080/13602009708716363. (accessed 11/09/2020); See also Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 16–17.

¹¹ See Mukerrem Miftah, “At Issue: The ‘Muslims in Ethiopia Complex’ and Muslim Identity: The Trilogy of Discourse, Policy, and Identity,” *African Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2015), 73–74 and Hussein Ahmed, “Coexistence and/or Confrontation?: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006), 6.

¹² Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 157–58. To the Somali’ radical, however, Zenawi was depicted as Abraha due to his international policy toward Somali. Erlich 7

¹³ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 8.

¹⁴ See note 2.

¹⁵ Lewis Coser, “Introduction” in Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser, 34.

¹⁶ Barry Schwartz, “The Reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Collective Remembering*, ed. David Middleton and Derek Edwards (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990), 81–107 quoted in Coser, “Introduction,” 30.

¹⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Ditter and Ditter, 23.

always formed in relation to others’ memories, namely collective memory. On the other hand, Halbwachs assures that collective memory has no memory on its own because it is formed by the individuals’ memories. Halbwachs states, “while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember.”¹⁸ Thus the idea of collective memory does not refer to an autonomous, free-floating entity. It is a memory shared among the members of a group.

Since individual memory is strongly connected to collective memory, Halbwachs further argues the importance of one’s relation to a group, physical and imagined, to internalize, preserve, and transfer memory. Halbwachs states, “from the moment when we and these other witnesses belong to the same group and think in common about these matters, we maintain contact with this group and remain capable of identifying ourselves with it and merging our past with its.”¹⁹ In short, one’s belongingness to a group shapes her connection, identification, and memory with the group. Belongingness brings collective memory to a different level of conversation. One’s sense of belonging to a group reflects the importance and meaning of that group for her, which leads to her self-identification to the collective memory of that group. Halbwachs calls this aspect the emotional or affective relationship. The greater one’s emotional tie to a group (or a person), the stronger and richer one shares collective memory with them.²⁰

Halbwachs believes collective memory is dynamic because it “is not a given but rather a socially constructed notion.”²¹ It can not only be strengthened but also be weakened or even be faded away. Due to individual and collective memory’s interrelatedness, one’s participation and identification with the collective memory should always be in harmony with others in the group. In her relation to collective memory, one is not merely a passive receiver. She is an active actor who forms and shapes a group’s collective memory, since and as long as she is part of the group, physically and/or emotionally. One’s “points of contact” to the collective memory is through the “data or conceptions” that she shares with others. The fewer points of contact one has with the group members, the weaker her participation in their collective memory. Therefore, once a person, either physically or emotionally, lives at a distance from his group, his participation in the group’s collective memory weakens or fades due to his fewer points of contact with the group.

Halbwachs also distinguishes two types of collective memory, namely historical and autobiographical memories. For him, historical memory refers to any information on events or historical facts that one knows and learns from external sources. That information about the past becomes one’s collective memory because it lives in society’s memory. As long as the information is only in the form of “dates, arbitrary definitions, and reminders of events,” it will remain an “external” fact.²² But if the information gives meaning to someone’s life, it becomes an internal, autobiographical memory. To make his point, Halbwachs relates how the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 became a meaningful memory for him though he did not experience it directly. His parents experienced the war and through it “they acquired certain habits and characteristics that became part of their personality and made an early impression upon” him.²³ Thus, the war

¹⁸ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 48.

¹⁹ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 25.

²⁰ Halbwachs makes this point through an example of a lover. See *The Collective Memory*, 28.

²¹ Lewis A. Coser “Introduction” in Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 22.

²² Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 53.

²³ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 53.

becomes an autobiographical memory for Halbwachs because he experiences it indirectly through his parents.

Halbwachs' description of historical memory seems to reflect the modern notion that sees history as objective facts. He defines history as "whatever distinguishes one period from all others, something of which books and narratives generally give us only a very schematic and incomplete picture."²⁴ This is, however, contrary to the nature of history. An event becomes history because a person or group of people experiences and gives meaning to it. Therefore, history cannot be just a set of objective facts. It must have meaning for someone or a group. When a tree falls in the middle of a jungle, and no human sees and experiences it, the incident will not become history because it does not have meaning to any human. But when lightning terrified Martin Luther and led him to become a monk, it became history. Thus, I argue, the distinction between historical memory and autobiographical memory does not lie in the external and internal categories, but the degree of subjectivity or meaning of that memory.

This view is in line with Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi's argument. In one of his articles, Cardoza-Orlandi criticizes the modern notion of time as "past, present, and future [that] prevents us from discovering connections in the continuum of creation and human events." Further, as a historian, he argues, "a good historian imagines and articulates the connections between the historical material and her or his context. The historian resurrects the history, bringing to life an event of a different time and space. Therefore, history is not the study of things past, but the discovery of things new wrapped in materials different to our time and space."²⁵ Though Cardoza-Orlandi specifically speaks about historians, I think his idea is also accurate for all human beings. History is valuable when we interpret it with our context, and we let it interpret us. Further, when we share this meaning-making of history with other people in our groups, it becomes a collective memory that diffuses the modern concept of past, present, and future.

As I will show below, in the context of Islam-Christian relations in Ethiopia, the dynamics between historical, autobiographical, individual, and collective memories are present and influence how Ethiopian Christians and Muslims appropriate the stories of *Al-Najāshī* and *Kebra Nagast* in their relationship toward each other. For Ethiopian Christians and Muslims, their respective stories are not merely an account of history in the past, but also a narrative that gives a sense of identity and a vision to be realized.

***Kebra Nagast*: Formation of the Ethiopian Christian's Collective Memory**

The earliest account of Christianity coming to Ethiopia can be found in the *Ecclesiastical History* written by Rufinus at the end of the fourth century. According to Rufinus, Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia's royal family through the lives of two young Syrian slaves, Frementius and Aedesius, who worked for King Ala-Amida and Queen Sofya (294–325 CE).²⁶ Upon the

²⁴ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 57.

²⁵ "Prophetic Dialogue: A Historical Perspective Bending Time in History to Rediscover the Gospel" *Missiology: An International Review* 41(1), 23.

²⁶ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 215; William B. Anderson and Ogbu U. Kalu, "Christianity in Sudan and Ethiopia" in Ogbu U. Kalu

king’s death, Queen Sofya appointed the young men to be royal administrators until her sons, grew up. The Queen’s sons converted to Christianity under Frementius, and they jointly took the throne as Kings Ezana and Shaizana.²⁷ Under their kingship, Christianity became the state religion. Later in 330/340 CE, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, appointed Frementius as a missionary Bishop to Aksum, the capital of Ancient Ethiopia.

Little is known about Frementius’ further missionary works. However, there are two essential things to note during or after Frementius’ ministry as bishop. First, through his ordination by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, Frementius linked and placed Ethiopian Church under the authority of the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Second, it is possible that the Bible was translated into Ethiopic during his ministry as a bishop. Who the translator was, and how the translation was carried out is uncertain. Hastings argues that it is likely that the translation was done bit by bit, starting with parts of the New Testament in Greek and finished before the end of the fifth century.²⁸ Through the translation process, Christianity gradually became an inseparable part of Ethiopian cultural and religious identity. This is particularly evident in the myth of Solomonic line that construes biblical figures as the ancestors of Ethiopian kings. The myth was recorded in *Kebra Nagast*, which (scholars agree) was written to justify the claim of Solomonic Dynasty on the throne of Ethiopia.²⁹

The form of *Kebra Nagast* known today was written in the Ge’ez language (or translated into it) by a certain “Yeshaq [Isaac] the poor” (a lay governor of Aksum) and his colleagues in 1314–1322 CE. It claims that the kings of Ethiopia were descendants of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Israel, whose meeting narrative was recorded in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kings 10: 1–13 and 2 Chronicles 9: 1–12).³⁰ In its narrative, Queen of Sheba is identified with Makeda, Queen of Aksum. From her meeting with King Solomon, Queen Makeda became pregnant and gave birth to Menilek, who later became the first Solomonic King of Aksum, the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia.³¹ The book also tells that when Menilek returned to Ethiopia (after he had visited Solomon in Jerusalem), the sons of the Israeli nobility, whom Solomon had sent to accompany Menilek, took the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.³² Thus, *Kebra Nagast* not only claims the Solomonic lineage of their kings, but also claims Ethiopia as the new Zion, upon which God dwells, and “the King of Ethiopia as the King of Zion and the firstborn of the seed of

(ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria, South Africa: Department of History-University of Pretoria, 2005), 106

²⁷ These names come from several sources: (1) a Greek work, the *Defense to Constantius*, by Athanasius in which he mentioned a letter from Romans Emperor Constantius II (337–361 CE) to Aizanas and Sazanas, two leading figures in Aksum; (2) Aksumite coins bearing the name King Ezana; and (3) an inscription that mentions Saiazanana as a brother of King Aizanas. See Phillip F. Esler, *Ethiopian Christianity: History, Theology, Practice* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 32–33.

²⁸ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8

²⁹ David A. Hubbard, “The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*,” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1956), 360.

³⁰ Pierluigi Piovanelli, “The Apocryphal Legitimation of a “Solomonic” Dynasty in the *Kebra Nagast*: A Reappraisal,” *Aethiopica* 16 (2013), 9–10; E. A. Wallis Budge, trans., *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek* (*Kebra Nagast*) (Cambridge, ON: In Parentheses Publications, 2000[1932]), iii–iv, 199. Pakhurst, 55.

³¹ In the book, the Queen named her son (who is known in Ethiopian later tradition as Menilek) Bayna Lehem and when the Israelites anointed him as a king, they named him David, after King Solomon’s father. See Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 32–34

³² Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 61, 67–69.

Shem.”³³ This is in line with the Ethiopian self-understanding—at least those who speak Semitic languages like Ge’ez—that they are descendants of Shem and not Ham. Thus, “they consider themselves to be red and the surrounding peoples . . . to be black.”³⁴

Although the final form of *Kebra Nagast* dates from the 14th century, the stories in the book seem to come from various sources in earlier times. In the colophon section, Yeshaq claims that the original version of the book was a Coptic manuscript now belonging to the See of Alexandria, that was subsequently translated into Arabic—the version that Yeshaq used for his Ge’ez translation—by unknown figures Abal’ez and Abalfarag in 1225.³⁵ Moreover, in many places the book also quotes at great length the accounts attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus, Patriarch Dematyos [Domitius] of Constantinople, and Archbishop Cyril of Alexandria.³⁶ However, neither Yeshaq’s claim of Coptic or Arabic origin of *Kebra Nagast* nor the book’s attribution to Gregory, Dematyos and Cyril is reliable, due to the absence of traceable sources and the presence of anachronisms.³⁷ Nevertheless, *Kebra Nagast* mentions at least one important historical reference. It refers to King Justinus of Rome (also known as Emperor Justin I of Constantinople) and King Kaleb of Ethiopia. This reference is important because two ancient sources—*Martyrdom of Aretha* and Cosmas Indicopleustes’ *Christian Topography*—relate that Emperor Justin sent a letter asking King Caleb for help in fighting against Dhu Nuwa, a convert to Judaism, who besieged the Christian city of Najran in Arabia in c. 522–523.³⁸ This shows how powerful the Kingdom of Ethiopia was in the region in the fifth and sixth centuries, and is related to the story of Abraha and *al-Najāshī* in the Islamic tradition.

Abraha and al-Najāshī: Two Muslims’ Collective Memories

The Islamic tradition has many references to Ethiopia; but two narratives specifically relate to Ethiopian kings. The first tells of the attempt to attack the Kaaba in 570 CE by Abraha. In the history of Ethiopia, he is said to have been a former governor of King Kaleb who might have rebelled and attempted to establish a separate government over Arabia.³⁹ In the story narrated by Ibn Ishaq, Abraha made a cathedral in Sana’a, Yemen, for the *Negus* (*al-Najāshī*/the King) of Ethiopia and required all Arabs to pilgrimage to the cathedral. But then,

A Kinanite went forth until he came to the cathedral and defiled it. Then he returned to his own country. Hearing of the matter Abraha made inquiries and learned that the outrage had been committed by an Arab who came from the temple in Mecca where the Arabs went on pilgrimage, and that he had done this in anger at his threat to divert the Arabs pilgrimage to the cathedral, showing

³³ Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 142

³⁴ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 177

³⁵ Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 199; Piovanelli, “The Apocryphal Legitimation,” 9 (fn9); Hubbard, “The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*,” 358.

³⁶ Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, xxvi; Hubbard, “The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*,” 358–59.

³⁷ Hubbard, “The Literary Sources of the *Kebra Nagast*,” 359.

³⁸ David Phillipson, *Foundation of an African Civilization: Aksum and The Northern Horn 1000 BC–AD 1300*, (Suffolk, UK: James Currey, 2012), 204.

³⁹ Piovanelli, “The Apocryphal Legitimation,” 17–18; Phillipson, *Foundation of an African Civilization*, 205–206.

thereby that it was unworthy of reverence. Abraha was enraged and swore that he would go to this temple and destroy it.⁴⁰

Riding on an elephant, Abraha went to Kaaba and attempted to attack and destroy it. But miraculously, Allah protected the Kaaba by sending a flock of birds throwing stones upon Abraha’s army and defeated them.⁴¹ This story is preserved as part of Muslim collective memory because many Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was born in the year when Abraha attacked the Kaaba.⁴² In Muslim collective memory in general, Abraha’s attack on the Kaaba is remembered as a depiction of hostility done by an Ethiopian toward Islam. Hadith collections by both al-Bukhari and Muslim include a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that a lean-legged (or a thin legged) Ethiopian will (eventually) destroy the Kaaba.⁴³ This image, however, provides only one side of Muslim collective memory of Christianity and Ethiopia. A second story depicts Christian and Ethiopian hospitality toward Muslims in the figure of *al-Najāshī*, the Christian king of Ethiopia, who welcomed and protected the first Muslim refugees in Aksum.⁴⁴

In the first years of his mission to preach Islam in Mecca, Muhammad was rejected by the Quraish of the city, though a small number of people accepted his message. When the resistance was increased to the point of endangering his life and the lives of his early followers (or *ṣahābah*; Arabic: companions), Muhammad decided to send some of them to seek refuge in Ethiopia (615–616 CE). Ibn Ishaq narrates,

When the apostle [Muhammad] saw the affliction of his companions and though he escaped it because of his standing with Allah and his uncle Abu Talib, he could not protect them, he said to them: ‘If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress.’ Thereupon his companions went to Abyssinia, being afraid of apostasy and fleeing to God with their religion. This was the first hijra in Islam.⁴⁵

The story shows that the reputation and power of the Ethiopian king was well known in the region; thus, Muhammad believed that the king would welcome and look after his followers. Ibn Ishaq records that eighty-three men, not including women and children, went as migrants seeking asylum in Ethiopia.⁴⁶ One of the women who joined the refugee group was Umm Salama, who later became one of Muhammad’s wives. Umma Salama shared her memories,

⁴⁰ Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad (Sirat Rasul Allah)*, trans. A. Guillaume (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1955]), 22.

⁴¹ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 26.

⁴² Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 173.

⁴³ Emeri van Donzel, “Abraha the Abyssinian in Islamic Tradition,” *Aethiopica* 12 (2009), 53–54; Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, 13.

⁴⁴ There is also a tradition about Bilal ibn Rabbah, an Ethiopian who converted to Islam in the early days of the Prophet Muhammad and became the first *mu’adhdhin* (the muezzin, or the person who gives the call to prayer at the mosque). Unlike Abraha and *Al-Najāshī*, Bilal was a slave who has no claim to power and authority, thus incomparable to the Solomonic claim of the Christian Ethiopian kings.

⁴⁵ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 146.

⁴⁶ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 148.

“When we reached Abyssinia (Ethiopia), the *Negus* (*al-Najāshī*) gave us a kind reception. We safely practiced our religion, and we worshipped God, and suffered no wrong in word or deed.”⁴⁷

Al-Najāshī extended his hospitality to the Prophet’s *ṣaḥābah* throughout their stay in his kingdom. Of those who went to Ethiopia, thirty-three men, along with their wives, returned to Mecca shortly thereafter—because they heard the wrong news that the inhabitants of Mecca had embraced Islam,—while the rest remained in Ethiopia. In 628, weighted down with gifts from *al-Najāshī*, the rest of the *ṣaḥābah* rejoined with the Prophet who had migrated with other Muslims to Medina in 622.⁴⁸ *Al-Najāshī*’s hospitality is recorded in various Islamic traditions and becomes Muslims’ collective memory. Islamic tradition even states that *al-Najāshī*—and the bishops with him—wept over a Qur’an recitation by Ja‘far, one of the *ṣaḥābah*, and he agreed with most of the *ṣaḥābah*’s Islamic presentations of Jesus.⁴⁹ Eventually, Ibn Ishaq also claims that *al-Najāshī* converted to Islam, and hence became the spiritual ancestor of Ethiopian Muslims.⁵⁰ Therefore, Ethiopian Muslims may remember *al-Najāshī* and his hospitality not as the historical memory of the past but as an autobiographical memory that lives and directs their vision of Ethiopia.

The claim of the Solomonic line and the story of *al-Najāshī* are two different collective memories. In history, it seems that the Solomonic line’s claim refers to Christianity as the identity of the Ethiopian kingdom. Likewise, the story of *al-Najāshī* seems to presuppose the meeting of two identities: Christian and Muslim. However, I argue that these two stories refer to the same broad historical context, namely the Ethiopian hegemony in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula in the fourth to the seventh century. In other words, both collective memories refer to the meaning and use of power, though not in the exact same way. For the Ethiopian Christian, the Solomonic line refers to their collective memory of sovereignty and glory. While for the Ethiopian Muslims, the stories of Abraha and *al-Najāshī* refer to their collective memory of the dual nature of power: attack and protect. Both the Solomonic line’s claim and the story of *al-Najāshī* appears in political communication and actions since the reign of Yohannes IV, Menilek II, Leg Iyasu, and Haile Selassie, the last Emperor of Ethiopia.

Three Eras of Christian-Muslim Relations in Ethiopia

In terms of the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia, Temesgen Gebeyehu Baye gives a helpful suggestion to see it as three eras.⁵¹ The first era stretched from the first *hijra* of the Prophet’s *ṣaḥābah* (615–616 CE) to the 16th century. In this era, the Christian Aksumite, Zawge, and Solomonic dynasties ruled over the Muslims in Ethiopia and its borderlands. Muslims were small in number but they grew steadily in eastern and southern part of Ethiopia—the areas that had not yet reached by Christianity—mostly through “the international trade routes that linked

⁴⁷ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 150.

⁴⁸ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 527–30; William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 66; David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111.

⁴⁹ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 152.

⁵⁰ Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 155.

⁵¹ Temesgen Gebeyehu Baye, “Muslims in Ethiopia: History and Identity” *African Studies* 77, no. 3 (2018), 413–16. Baye calls his historical categorization as “stages of development.” The terms “stage” and “development,” however, might be misleading since they indicate a notion of progress, while Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia have had ups and downs throughout history. Hence, I prefer the term “era.”

Ethiopia with the Arabian world.”⁵² The Muslim communities in the southern borderland of the Ethiopia kingdom developed into sultanates. Compared to the Christian kingdom, these sultanates had weaker military strength so that when the former expanded to the south, they managed to defeat and make the later tributary to Ethiopia.⁵³

The second era was much shorter. It extended from the 16th to the 19th century.⁵⁴ This era was marked by the weakening of Christianity and strengthening of Muslim communities, thanks to the moral and military support of the Ottomans who had taken control over Egypt in 1517 and Yemen in 1525. In 1529, Imam Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Ghazi—known as Ahmad Gragn—a charismatic leader from Harar, managed to lead the Muslim army to defeat the emperor’s army and seize area by area as far as Tegray in the north. Gragn’s fifteen-year heyday ended when Ethiopia, aided by Portuguese troops, defeated him in a battle in 1543. Since then Muslim sultanates have again become the Ethiopia’s vassals. However, Islam continued to grow until around 1630, when (it is estimated) one-third of Ethiopia’s population was Muslim. This increase in Muslim population brought concern to the Ethiopian government, hence, in 1678, Emperor Yohannes I declared a rule that Muslims live separately out of Christian villages and cities and they were not allowed to own land.⁵⁵

The third era began at the reign of Emperor Tewodros II, who ascended to the throne in 1855.⁵⁶ In the previous period, from 1769 to 1855, the emperors’ power was weaker than the regional princes, so they acted only as puppet kings.⁵⁷ Tewodros was determined to restore the emperor’s wealth and power to rule over the regional princes. Tewodros was a devout Christian and he saw that consistency and church as an identity and an entity that could reunite Ethiopia. Just like the previous rulers of Ethiopia, Tewodros “regarded Ethiopia and Orthodox Christianity as identical.”⁵⁸ In 1864, Tewodros gave an extreme order requiring that all his Muslim subjects should be converted Christianity. Those who refused the order left the empire and moved to the periphery.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Tewodros failed to actualize his vision of united Ethiopia due to the resistances and rebellions of the regional princes. It was Yohannes IV who succeeded in unifying and expanding the kingdom.

Yohannes IV (1872–1889)

Emperor Yohannes IV is a significant figure for our search for the meaning and use of collective memory in Christian-Muslim political discourse in modern Ethiopia. His birth name was Kasa Merca and he was one of three regional princes—the other two were Wagshum Gobaze Gabra Madhen of Lasta and Menilek of Sawa—who wanted to unite and rule all of Ethiopia as Emperor, following the political vision and legacy of Tewodros II.⁶⁰ When Tewodros were still

⁵² Dereje Feyissa and Bruce B. Lawrence, “Muslims Renegotiating Marginality in Contemporary Ethiopia” *Muslim World* 104 (2014), 283; Baye, “Muslims in Ethiopia: History and Identity,” 413.

⁵³ Lidwien Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa” in *History of Islam in Africa*, Nehemia Levtzion and Randal L. Pouwels, eds. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), 228–29.

⁵⁴ Baye, “Muslims in Ethiopia: History and Identity,” 415.

⁵⁵ Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa,” 229–31; Baye, “Muslims in Ethiopia: History and Identity,” 415.

⁵⁶ Baye, “Muslims in Ethiopia: History and Identity,” 415.

⁵⁷ Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa,” 231.

⁵⁸ Esler, *Ethiopian Christianity*, 80-81.

⁵⁹ Baye, “Muslims in Ethiopia: History and Identity,” 415.

⁶⁰ Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 241.

ruling, Kasa Merca had declared himself as the independent ruler of all Tegray and thus presented himself as an opponent to the former.⁶¹ After Tewodros committed suicide at Meqdela in 1868, Kasa Merca concentrated his opposition against Wagshum Gobaze, who—within a few months after Tewodros died—had declared himself Ase (Emperor) Takla Giyorgis replacing the former ruler of Ethiopia.⁶² Their rivalry ended when Kasa Merca defeated Takla Giyorgis in the Battle of Assam on July 11, 1871. Six months later, on January 21, 1872, Kasa Merca was crowned Emperor Yohannes IV.⁶³

The first nation-wide call for the Ethiopians to defend their land and faith in the modern time happened during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV.⁶⁴ At that time, Khedive Isma'il of Egypt sought to expand his rule and establish an African empire covering Sudan, the Red Sea, and the Tegray area, the northern part of Ethiopia. This Isma'il annexation effort was entirely based on political interests. However, Yohannes saw the expansion as an attempt of Islamic Egypt to dominate over Christian Ethiopia.⁶⁵ In his own words, Yohannes interpreted Isma'il's military invasion as the Islamization of Ethiopia. Yohannes' perception can be understood by looking at religious life in Ethiopia. From the time of Frementius in the fourth century until Yohannes' era, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was under the authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. Hence, the life of Coptic Christians under the domination of Islamic Egypt's rule influenced how the Ethiopians viewed Egypt.

Another possible explanation comes from Yohannes' letters to Queen Victoria and to Lord Granville in 1872. Since Egypt was under the British' influence during that time, Yohannes sent his letters to implicitly ask them to use their power to end Isma'il's invasion into Ethiopia. Yohannes wrote to the Queen, "You know the history of Ethiopia; there was in ancient times a man called Mahomet (Grian) a Mahometan who headed a rebellion in our country, he killed the Christian King and the Christian people, and burned all the churches, and drove many Christians into the desert."⁶⁶ In those words, Yohannes was referring to the powerful Muslim leader, Imam Ahmad b. Ibrahim, also known as Ahmad Gagn, who conquered and ruled as far as central and northern Ethiopia in the first half of the sixteenth century.⁶⁷ That period of the Muslim ruling over Ethiopia was traumatic for Ethiopian Christian, and Isma'il's invasion evoked that trauma back.

The letters have another importance. To Lord Granville, Yohannes also wrote, "There is a book called Kivera Negust (*Kebra Nagast*), which contains the law of the whole of Ethiopia, and the names of *Shums* (Chiefs) Churches, and Provinces are in this book, I pray you will find out who has got this book, and send it to me, for in my country, my people will not obey my orders without it—I have also written to the Queen about this."⁶⁸ Previously two royal copies of *Kebra*

⁶¹ Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 259, 270–72.

⁶² Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 174, 271.

⁶³ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1974* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1991), 42–43; Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 270–71.

⁶⁴ J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1952), 121.

⁶⁵ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 12.

⁶⁶ Edward Ullendorff and Abraham Demoz. "Two Letters from the Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia to Queen Victoria and Lord Granville" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1969), 137.

⁶⁷ Ahmed, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation?" 6.

⁶⁸ Ullendorff and Demoz, "Two Letters from the Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia," 141.

Nagast were taken to England and kept as part of the British Museum collections. The last words of that sentence are noteworthy: “My people will not obey my orders without it.” For Yohannes and his people, *Kebra Nagast* was not only a national epic. It has the power to legitimize Yohannes to rule as a king, and for that reason, Yohannes was requesting the book to be returned to Ethiopia. In other words, Yohannes needed the book so he could claim the Solomonic line, which is the most important piece in the book. The request was granted; the Queen sent one of the copies to Yohannes.⁶⁹

Yohannes succeeded in uniting Ethiopian political and religious aspirations and thwarted Isma’il’s attempt of annexation in the 1875–1876 wars. His vision for political and religious unity drove him to enact an extreme policy. In 1878, he initiated forced mass conversion to Orthodox Christianity throughout Ethiopia.⁷⁰ As a result of this forced conversion, Erlich recorded, “by 1880 over five hundred thousand Oromo Muslims and some fifty thousand *Jabarti* (Muslims who spoke Amharic or Tigrinya)” were coerced into baptized.⁷¹ It is not surprising that this forced conversion gave rise to hatred of Christianity on the part of the Oromo and other Muslims.⁷²

Yohannes’s political and military success gave him even more courage to liberate and take over several regions from the power of Muhammad Ahmad (known as Mahdi), a Muslim military leader of neighboring Sudan. This action placed Yohannes to stand face to face with Mahdi. As a well-educated Islamic scholar, Mahdi saw himself as the successor (*caliph*) of the Prophet Muhammad and envisaged his relationship with the Ethiopian ruler from the Islamic tradition’s perspective. In a letter to Yohannes in 1885, Mahdi wrote,

The Lord gave you the honor to live in the prophetic period of my appearance as a caliph of our Prophet Muhammad. So like your predecessor the *Najāshī*, God bless him, who, when the Lord gave him the honor to live in the same time of our Prophet Muhammad, trusted and befriended him and sent him the *ṣahābah* [the prophet’s followers]. . . . I pray to the Lord who made you live in this blessed time that He will make you a successor to your predecessor by following me, and that He will lead you out of the darkness of the infidels to the light of the true belief.⁷³

Answering the Mahdi’s call to embrace Islam, Yohannes replied, “Do we not war with each other in our hearts? I am a Christian and thou a Muslim. Where I am, there canst not thou be. There, where thou art, can I not live in peace.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ullendorff and Demoz. “Two Letters from the Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia,” 136.

⁷⁰ Lidwien Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa” in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pounds (Eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 234. During the forced conversion, two most powerful Muslim chiefs of the northern and southern Wallo Galla region, Imam Muhammad ‘Ali and Imam Abba Watta, converted to Christianity and respectively they took the names Mikael and Haile Maryam. See Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 121. Later Mikael married Menilek’s daughter who gave birth to the future king, Leg Iyasu.

⁷¹ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 12; According to Trimmingham the result was “50,000 Muslims, 20,000 pagans and half of a million Galla.” See Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 123.

⁷² Shaikh Talha bin Ja’far, an Oromo Muslim scholar and military leader, responded to Yohannes’ Christianization with rebellions against Yohannes. Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa,” 234; Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 23.

⁷³ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 14.

⁷⁴ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 16.

Mahdi died six days after he wrote the letter; thus, we cannot see how his relationship with Yohannes continued. However, Mahdi's letter provides a clear vignette of how Muslims in the Horn of Africa conceived Ethiopia and its ruler using their Islamic tradition as guidance. By doing this, they lived out the story of *Al-Najāshī* as their collective memory. On the other hand, guided by Ethiopian collective memory, largely formed by the *Kebra Nagast* myth and Ahmad Gragn traumatic history, Yohannes saw their identities as Christian and Muslim were mutually exclusive.⁷⁵ In Yohannes's mind, there is no place where Muslims and Christians can coexist.

But context did change Yohannes's firm conviction. At one point, Yohannes persuaded Mahdi's successor (who took on the title of caliph himself) that, rather than fighting against each other, each should focus on fighting against the European powers that tried to dominate the Horn of Africa. However, this invitation was rejected by this new caliph's commander (named Abu' Anja), due to Yohannes's earlier rejection of Mahdi's call for peace (and embrace of Islam).⁷⁶ Hence, the enmity between Yohannes and the caliph continued. Yohannes died in 1889 in his last battle with the caliph, and control of Ethiopia passed to Menilek of Sawa.⁷⁷

Menilek II (1889–1913)

As had emperors Takla Giyorgis and Yohannes IV, Menilek rebelled and declared himself an independent ruler of Sawa during the last years of the reign of Tewodros as emperor. He even claimed to be the *negusa nagast* (king of kings, i.e., emperor) when Tewodros was still alive and ruling. During Yohannes's reign as emperor of Ethiopia from 1872 to 1889, Menilek "remained...an uncomfortably powerful rival and vassal" to the former while "the two managed to avoid any full-scale armed conflict." However, when Yohannes advanced on Sawa in 1878, he obligated Menilek to submit and replace his

title into *negus* (king) while still recognizing him as, in effect, the quasi-independent ruler of Sawa.⁷⁸ When Yohannes died in 1889, Menilek declared himself emperor with the full support of the great majority of the principal regional lords of Ethiopia and moved from Sawa in the south to newly created capital of Addis Ababa in the north.⁷⁹

As a Christian, Menilek was as devout as Yohannes, during his rule as King of Sawa, he took a different political approach toward Muslims. He was more open to work with and employ Muslims in his administration.⁸⁰ As an emperor, Menilek did not take any political actions on behalf of or using religious issues, as Yohannes had. Indeed, on one occasion, Menilek conveyed to envoys of the caliph envoys that they should put aside the religious differences between them.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Not all Ethiopian leaders had the same view as Yohannes. Menilek, who ruled the Sawa region and Ras Alula, who ruled in Asmara, both showed the openness to employ and work with Muslims in their area. Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 22.

⁷⁶ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 25–27

⁷⁷ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 29.

⁷⁸ Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, 270, 272; Christopher Clapham, "Mənilək II" in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia* vol. 3, Siegbert Uhlig, ed. (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2007), 922–24.

⁷⁹ Clapham, "Mənilək II," 924–25.

⁸⁰ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 22.

⁸¹ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 35.

Moreover, in his communication with the caliph, Menilek would start his letters with Islamic salutations, thus showing respect to the Sudanese Muslim leader.⁸²

During Menilek’s rule over Ethiopia, European powers attacked deeper into the Horn of Africa. Responding to this, Menilek offered friendship to the caliph in Sudan so that each one would focus on facing the European invasion. The caliph accepted the offer, and when his strength weakened to the point of falling under British rule, Menilek did not take the opportunity to attack him. In exchange, in 1897, the caliph voluntarily ceded the Banu Shangul area to Menilek, instead of letting it fall into British hands. Later, in 1898, local Muslim leaders in Qallabat followed the caliph’s decision by inviting Menilek to annex their territory as a better option than handing it over to the British. Perhaps without realizing it, Menilek, in the eyes of the Sudanese Muslims, personified the Islamic collective memory of *al-Najāshī*, who welcomed and protected the first Muslim immigrants.

Menilek, however, was a complex figure. Early in his reign as emperor, he sent a circular to European powers in Africa expressing his political interest both as a “defender of Africa” and a “local colonialist.” He wrote, “I have not the least intention of remaining a disinterested onlooker, if powers from a distance come with the notion of dividing Africa between themselves. Ethiopia was, in the course of fourteen centuries, an island inhabited by Christians in a sea of pagans.”⁸³ Recent scholarship shows that Menilek’s main purpose in that statement was to reflect the European idea of Ethiopia as an isolated Christian country. He used rhetoric to direct European conversion and colonialization ambitions towards the neighboring nations and away from Ethiopia.⁸⁴ However, the statement also exhibits the Ethiopian collective memory as a Christian Kingdom of Solomonic lineage. It is no coincidence that Menilek had the same name as the first Solomonic Ethiopian king, Menilek I, because Menilek II’s family indeed claimed to be the descendant of the Solomonic line.⁸⁵

In history, Menilek is also remembered as the conqueror of Harar and Ogaden, two Muslim majority independent territories in eastern Ethiopia.⁸⁶ In 1887, while still ruling as king of Sawa, Menilek conquered Harar, a significant city for Muslims east of Ethiopia. In the sixteenth century, Harar was the Adal Sultanate’s capital, from which Ahmad Gragn ruled over Ethiopia.⁸⁷ However, Menilek did not coerce Christianization of his Muslim subjects; instead, he preferred to work with the city’s Muslim elites.⁸⁸ The two facts above show that in terms of claims to the Solomonic line in *Kebra Nagast* and Ethiopia as a Christian country, Menilek was as sturdy as Yohannes. However, these two leaders differed in the approach and action to be taken in dealing with Muslims.

⁸² Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 32.

⁸³ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 44.

⁸⁴ Samuel Rubenson, “The European Impact on Christian-Muslim Relations in the Middle East During the Nineteenth Century. The Ethiopian Example.” 118, 124.

⁸⁵ Trimmingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, 107.

⁸⁶ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 43, 45.

⁸⁷ Ahmed, “Coexistence and/or Confrontation?” 6.

⁸⁸ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 46.

Leg Iyasu (1913–1916) and Haile Selassie (1930–1974)

When Menilek died, the Ethiopian throne was passed to Leg Iyasu, Menilek's only grandson from his daughter Princess Sewaraga. Iyasu's father had been one of the last two Muslim Oromo-Amhara *Imams* of the Mammedoch dynasty of Wallo, under the name of Mahammad Ali. Ali, along with his rival *Imam* Amede Abba Wat'ew, converted to Christianity after the Muslim dynasty was subjugated during political and religious campaign of Yohannes IV in 1878. Ali was baptized as Mika'el and made *Ras* (duke or prince) after his baptism.⁸⁹ As the only grandson of Menilek, Iyasu was the heir to Christian Solomonic dynasty and as the son of Ras Mika'el, he was also the heir to Muslim Mammedoch dynasty, which claimed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁰ In a war situation, Iyasu seemed to want to use his relations with Muslims both inside and outside the empire's border to consolidate Ethiopian politics. From the Muslim perspective, what Iyasu wanted to do was to accommodate Islam and integrate Ethiopian Muslims into the Ethiopian polity. Iyasu was likely familiar with the story of *al-Najāshī* because he grew up in a family that had ties to Muslim Wallo. But whether he was aware of it or not, his openness to embrace and build relationships with Muslims had made him the representation of *al-Najāshī* for Muslims in his time. The image of Leg Iyasu as a representation of *al-Najāshī*, who warmly welcomed the first Muslim migrants and even later believed converted to Islam, still lives in the Ethiopian Muslims' memory to this day.⁹¹

However, Ethiopian Christians perceived Iyasu differently; they thought Iyasu want to disestablish the Orthodox Church.⁹² Although Iyasu never declared that he converted to Islam, his personal and political affiliation to Ethiopian Muslims, Ottoman Turkey, and *Sayid* of Somali was seen as anti-Christian and proof of his conversion. At least, this view was shared by the Christian political elite of his time and they used the alleged conversion to remove Iyasu from his office. In his autobiography, Emperor Haile Selassie (formerly Ras Tafari Makonnen),⁹³ who played a major role in dethroning Iyasu, said,

The Christian faith, which our fathers had hitherto carefully retained by fighting for their faith with Muslims and by shedding their blood, [Leg] Iyasu exchanged for the Muslim religion and aroused commotion in our midst; in order to exterminate us by mutual fighting, he has converted to Islam and, therefore, we shall henceforth not submit to him; we shall not place a Muslim on the throne of a Christian King.⁹⁴

The statement shows that for Haile Selassie and Ethiopian Christians, the throne belonged to a Christian King; thus, Ethiopia was a Christian country. Though they were open to live and work

⁸⁹ Eloi Ficquet, "Understanding Lij Iyasu through His Forefathers: The Mammedoch *Imam*-s of Wello," in *The Life and Times of Lij Iyasu of Ethiopia: New Insight*, Eloi Ficquet and Wolbert G.C Smidt, eds. (Zurich: LIT, 2014), 5–6. In his article, Ficquet shows that interreligious marriages between Oromo Muslims and Amhara Christians were common practices in Wello, particularly among the nobles.

⁹⁰ Eloi Ficquet, "Mammādoc Dynasty," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* vol. 3, Siegbert Uhlig, ed. (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2007), 715-717.

⁹¹ Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, 196.

⁹² Ahmed, "Coexistence and/or Confrontation?" 8.

⁹³ Selassie's real name was Tafari. He took the name Haile Selassie when he was enthroned as the Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930. See Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 82.

⁹⁴ Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia*, 24.

with Muslims, the country’s power should remain in Christians’ hands. This conception was evident from the political policies of Haile Selassie when he ruled as first as a regent to Empress Zawditu and later as the last emperor of Ethiopia.⁹⁵ In his political actions, Selassie reenacted the relationship between the Church and the Crown. He used his political influence to pressure the Patriarch of Alexandria to establish an autonomous Ethiopian Orthodox Church independent from the Coptic Orthodox Church. He thereby tightened the relationship between the empire and the church—and even strengthened the emperor’s role as “de facto head of the religious hierarchy.”⁹⁶ At the same time, however, Selassie avoided using Christian language in his administration. In fact, under his leadership, Ethiopia expressed itself more as a country open to all religions. For example, the country’s 1955 constitution defined being an Ethiopian based on civil citizenship, not Christian identity.⁹⁷ Thus, Selassie led Ethiopia into a paradox: de facto Ethiopia is a country dominated by Christian identity, but de jure it is a country for all.

The Appropriation of *Kebra Nagast* and *al-Najāshī* Collective Memory

The dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations during the reign of Yohannes IV, Menilek II, Leg Iyasu, and Haile Selassie show the strong influence of collective memories of *Kebra Nagast* and *Al-Najāshī* in the lives of Ethiopian Christians and Muslims, respectively. The tension between the two collective memories was seen most clearly in the relationship between Yohannes IV and the Mahdi of Sudan. In his letter to Lord Granville of England, Yohannes expressed how crucial the Solomonic claim in *Kebra Nagast* to legitimize his rule as an emperor over Ethiopians. While for the Mahdi, he saw himself as the representation of the Prophet Muhammad and Yohannes as the representation of *al-Najāshī*. For both of them, their respective collective memory directed their political vision and action. Emulating the Prophet Muhammad, Mahdi called to Yohannes to convert to Islam to follow the example of *al-Najāshī*—who, it was believed, had become a Muslim. Yohannes, on the other hand, motivated by his understanding of Ethiopia as a Christian island, rejected the idea to live and work together with Muslims. Therefore, Yohannes entirely rejected his depiction as a representation of *al-Najāshī*.

Menilek II, in his relationship with the caliph of Sudan, took a different political path from Yohannes. Although like Yohannes, he firmly held the claim of the Solomonic line and the notion of Ethiopia as a Christian Island, Menilek, it seems, to some degree, appropriated the image of *al-Najāshī* to himself. He warmly extended a friendly relationship to the caliph and other Muslim leaders around Ethiopia. He was also open to protecting and working with Ethiopian Muslims in his kingdom. Iyasu took another political path, which for the Orthodox Christian Ethiopians at that time was too extreme. As a son of a Christian convert from Islam, Leg Iyasu seemed more willing to set aside the *Kebra Nagast*’s claim and appropriate the image of *al-Najāshī* than Menilek, his grandfather, had been. More than other emperors before him, Iyasu wanted to accommodate Islam and integrate Ethiopian Muslims into the Ethiopian polity. Supported by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Haile Selassie rejected Iyasu’s political move and overthrew him

⁹⁵ During the reign of Empress Zawditu (1916–1930), Haile Selassie has already become the strong man of the empire who de facto ruled over Ethiopia.

⁹⁶ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 94. This happened given the fact since the medieval time the church was in practice “not so much a community of believers but rather a department of state. It is part of the social fabric of society, and so under the rule of the king.” John Binns, *The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia: A History* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 53.

⁹⁷ Erlich, *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa*, 95.

from the throne. During his reign as the last Emperor of Ethiopia, Selassie took another political path: *de jure*, he declared Ethiopia to be a kingdom for everyone, including Muslims and followers of other religions. However, as *de facto*, Selassie strengthened the reciprocal relationship between his kingdom and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and made Ethiopia an Orthodox Christendom again.

Casting Vision for a Harmonious Christian-Muslim Relationship in Ethiopia

In 1974, Haile Selassie was overthrown by a military and people's revolution that changed Ethiopia entirely. Post-revolution Ethiopia is no longer a Christian Empire, thus, the Solomonic claim to the throne is no longer valid. Although the notion of Ethiopia as a Christian nation still lives as the collective memory of Ethiopian Orthodox, it no longer serves as the political ideology of the government. On the other hand, the story of *al-Najāshī* also still lives as a collective memory—not only among Muslims in Ethiopia, but also in surrounding Muslim countries, such as Sudan, Somalia, and Saudi Arabia.⁹⁸ For Muslims, the story of *al-Najāshī* helps them project their expectations and realize them in their present experience. In other words, the story allows Muslims to construct their—using Cardoza-Orlandi's term—realized expectation.⁹⁹ The content of that expectation depends on how they perceive their context and interpret the memory.

A vision or aspiration of interreligious coexistence will not help much to build a sustainable, harmonious Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia. If coexistence is only defined as how people can live together side by side, this will place the Christian-Muslim relations in a status quo that will change quickly. And that change is bound to happen. According to Pew Research predictions at the beginning of this paper, the Muslim population will increase. These demographic changes will have an impact on religious majority-minority dynamics in Ethiopia. The larger the percentage of the population that is Muslim, the greater will be Muslim aspirations to express themselves in the public spaces, such as building more mosques and celebrating religious festivals in public. In addition to that, there are possibilities of greater political aspirations both through a more significant Muslim's representation in government and the enforcement of laws based on *Sharia*.¹⁰⁰

All the above-mentioned possible situations will be perceived as identity threats by most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. They still consider Ethiopia a Christian country. For example, in 2019, the BBC reported a case in Aksum where the Orthodox Christians opposed the construction of a mosque on the grounds that Aksum is the holy city of the Ethiopian Orthodox. The argument goes further, comparing Aksum to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which also prohibits the building of houses of worship of other religions.¹⁰¹ For Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Aksum is holy because of its links to the missionary work of Frementius, the first Bishop of

⁹⁸ A detail description of the use *Al-Najāshī* story in popular political discourses in Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia can be found in Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2007).

⁹⁹ Cardoza-Orlandi, "Prophetic Dialogue: A Historical Perspective Bending Time in History to Rediscover the Gospel" *Missiology: An International Review* 41(1), 26.

¹⁰⁰ Unlike other world religions, since its origin Islam is a religion as well as a political community that has the concept of *sharia* that regulates religious, social and political life.

¹⁰¹ Hana Zeratsyon, "Ethiopia mosque ban: 'Our sacred city of Aksum must be protected'" BBC News June 23, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48634427>

Ethiopian Christianity, and the claim of the Solomonic line of the ancient Ethiopian kingdom. Hence, this shows that the Solomonic claim lives as a collective memory of the Ethiopian Orthodox, and it directs them to perceive their world and act accordingly.

The Pew report stated that 85% of Aksum’s inhabitants are Ethiopian Orthodox, whereas Muslims make up around 10%, and the last 5% are other Christians. Any change to this religious demography may impact interfaith relations, especially between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. If the Muslim population in Aksum increases, the greater the need and desire of Muslims to build a mosque in the city. Thus, there is a possibility that there will be greater tension between Muslim collective memory of *al-Najāshī* and the Orthodox Christian collective memory of the Solomonic line, not only in Aksum but also in the whole of Ethiopia.

Here I argue, to build a harmonious interfaith relation in Ethiopia, a vision of interreligious cooperation and collaboration of its citizenry is needed. For this to be achieved, collective memory is of importance. The old way of living out the collective memory of *al-Najāshī* and the Solomonic claim of *Kebra Nagast* focuses on the importance of religious identity: us versus them. But, as I show above, both collective memories may refer to the meaning and the use of power. Yohannes IV, Menilek II, Leg Iyasu, and Haile Selassie appropriated the two collective memories in four different ways. If the two collective memories are juxtaposed with the notion of the common good, both can give rise to a constructive and robust vision for harmonious Christian-Muslim relations. Concerning their respective collective memory, Christians and Muslims are encouraged to ask, “What power do we have, and what should we do with it for the sake of the common good?” As stated above, according to Halbwachs, collective memory is formed and grows organically in a given society. Therefore, Ethiopian Christians and Muslims need to be encouraged to reinterpret their collective memories together, through meaningful and intense interfaith interactions.



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